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ABSTRACT

Educational failures in the United States are attributed to family problems, low I.Q. and poverty. In Australia, the ancient behavior of walkabout, where early Australians leave their camps at certain seasons of the year to look for food, is given as the reason for believing that Aborigines are uneducable and unemployable. The explanation works for both education and work in the following manner: Aborigines stay in school or at a job for a short period of time before they are compelled to go walkabout. As such, they cannot be relied upon to complete a job or maintain a working situation. Whites believe that walkabout is not only a traditional behavior, but also genetically determined. In a school situation, a teacher who believes this would tend to concentrate her teaching energies on children not subject to this genetic drive, a factor that affects the achievement of Aboriginal pupils. The conceptions among whites of what Aborigines are 'really' like varies greatly in some details, though the general stereotype involves the picture of a lazy, dull-witted primitive whose claim to uniqueness also genetically circumscribes him -- the compulsion to go walkabout. A lack of knowledge about the Aborigines, along with misconceptions, contribute to the psychological distance between groups, the lack of intergroup education, and the lack of interest in shool integration. Comparisons between the Australian situation and the U.S. are made throughout the paper. (Author/AM)

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THE WALKABOUT GENE

by

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In the United States we blame our educational failures on family problems, low I.Q., and poverty. But Australians have it all over us: They've got walkabout. As I understand the practice (and I probably do not have it accurately, because the only accounts I could find were obviously influenced by white perceptions) the early Australians left their camps at certain seasons of the year to look for food. The European colonists identified this behavior in pidgin as walkabout. Today, this ancient behavior is given as the reason for believing that Aborigines are uneducable and unemployable. It works this way: Aborigines stay in school only for a short period before they are compelled to go walkabout. The same applies to work. Therefore, they cannot be relied upon to complete a job or maintain a working situation. Not only, say the whites, is walkabout a traditional behavior, but it is actually genetically determined, so there is no way of changing it!

To illustrate how this explanation is used, there is the situation I encountered in a small-town school in the south-central part of Australia. The population is about 80% white (European), and about 20% of pure or mixed Aboriginal background. I asked the second grade teacher how the Aboriginal children compared with the European children in academic achievement. She assured me that the Aboriginal children could never equal the European children, and that the reason for this was a basic genetic difference that manifested itself in walkabout behavior. To illustrate, she pointed to one brown-skinned child and told me that last week he had gone walkabout, just disappeared in the middle of one day. Today was his first day back.

"He left in the midst of a new section in Math. Now he'll never be able to catch up with the others. And this is characteristic of them."

"That's interesting," I commented, "We have nothing like this kind of problem anywhere else. Where was he finally found?"

"Oh, he was at home, with his mother."

"He had run home?"

"Yes," she said. And I wondered how I could explain the behavior of the dozens of American children who run home to mother for comfort and safety when schools and teachers become too much for them. Walkabout was not in their genes!

"Tell me," I prompted her. "He hadn't been having any problem in school, had he? Anything that might have precipitated his leaving?

"No," she answered. "Nothing important. I did reprimand him once for leaving his seat without permission. But that's hardly a reason for going walkabout for a week! Other children are reprimanded and remain in school!"

"He left right after you scolded him?"

"Yes," she said. "But that wasn't the reason," she insisted.

If, as we have reason to believe, teacher expectations directly influence the achievement of pupils, we can infer the effect on achievement of Aboriginal pupils when teachers expect them to interrupt their schooling at crucial points in the learning process. The teacher who believes this would almost inevitably concentrate her teaching energies on children not subject to such a genetic drive. Nor would she be likely to look for other causes for the lack of achievement of the Aboriginal children.

In another school, this one with an all-Aboriginal population, walkabout was handled in a more direct way. One day I came upon the principal threatening an eight-year-old girl with a 2 x 4, while three smaller children stood nearby

and watched bug-eyed. It seems that the eight-year-old had taken two others (cousins of hers) by bus to a distant settlement to which her mother had gone, leaving her with an aunt. The children had returned when the mother could not be found, and now the principal was threatening the leader and preparing to beat her. "There's only one way to discourage them from just getting up and leaving every time they feel like it. "I realize," he added with compassion and a show of understanding, "that they really can't help it. Walkabout is in their blood. But they must learn that they have to stay in school."

He prided himself on having 98 per cent school attendance, the highest of any school in the area.

One of the few teachers I met who gave no credence to the walkabout idea was a young woman running a nursery school and day care center in an Aboriginal ghetto. Both the school and her living quarters were in a small bungalow. She was intimately involved in the day-to-day life of the people in the community, and even as we sat and talked in the early evening, neighbors came by to discuss problems, give information about a child, or just to pass the time of day. When I asked her about what the other school people had said about walkabout, she said it was nonsense. She insisted that we had to look for situational causes of leaving communities, jobs, and schools. "Generally", she said, "conditions are so bad, so unpleasant, and the people feel powerless to change them. So, what else is there to do but leave -- take a break -- and come back eventually because there are so few alternatives available to them?"

One wonders if white Australians have some lingering suspicion that non-whites around the world also suffer from genetic walkabout. One university professor, disagreeing with some of his colleagues present at the time, insisted that there was definitely prejudice against Aborigines. He said that what he called "the

white Australia feeling" was very strong in people's minds. When I was there (and, I think, it is still true) there was still an official immigration policy that excluded non-whites. One or two individuals believed that, though there was such a policy, non-whites with desirable skills were admitted to the country, though this practice was kept quiet for fear of the public reaction if it were known.

However, in the midst of Australia's international advertising encouraging people to immigrate, the Ugandan situation occurred. Asians in Uganda who had maintained their British citizenship were told to leave the country. At first, Australia gave no indication of permitting any of them to enter. Eventually, they agreed to accept one hundred one carefully-screened applicants, but offered no help to them (though Europeans and Americans do receive various types of financial inducements). The approved applicants were doctors, civil engineers, accountants, etc., though Europeans and Americans are accepted with far less specialized skills.

In spite of the continuing general low level of awareness, there is evidence that, for the past ten years, white Australians have been becoming more aware of Aborigines and their problems. No small contribution to this increased awareness is the growing Aboriginal movement, which has taken on some of the methods and language of the Black movement and the Indian movement of the United States. Perhaps the organization and demonstrations have contributed to the recent promises of the new Labour government to change landright policy and permit self-determination in Aboriginal communities.

It is curious, however, how similar are the responses of white Australians to the responses of white Americans faced with agressive demands for justice from minority people. While I was in Australia, a group of young Aborigines and some white sympathizers set up an "Aboriginal Embassy" across the street

from Parliament in the capital of Canberra. The "Embassy" was a symbolic rejection of the white man's law that exploited Aborigines. Every single Australian I talked to about this told me that the whole fuss was caused by "outside agitators". (The same outside agitators who registered voters in Louisiana?) Curiously, Australians seem to suffer intensely from the feeling that they are alone and isolated in an alien part of the world. It is difficult to understand just where they think these outsiders are coming from.

A small footnote to this business of white attitudes is a study done by a team of university teachers of Education and sponsored by the Australian Council for Educational Research. The subjects of the study were identified as Australians, Migrants and Aborigines. Apparently Aborigines are not thought of as Australians!

The conceptions among whites of what Aborigines are "really" like varies greatly in some details, though the general stereotype involves the picture of the lazy, dull-witted, dirty primitive whose claim to uniqueness also genetically circumscribes him: that compulsion to go walkabout. A drunk in a bar in Alice Springs told me -- gratuitously -- that "the worst thing we ever did was to let the Abos have liquor. They're not treated badly," he assured me. "They're useless bastards."

Peculiarly, without recognizing the contradiction in what he was saying, he added, "Their problem is, white men won't hire them."

He, himself, was a living demonstration of the injustice done Aborigines. He was a newcomer to Alice Springs, having arrived two months earlier on one of his frequent periodic resolutions to end his career as a merchant seaman. He had, immediately on his arrival, applied for and obtained a job as driver of an ambulance. He appeared to be an alcoholic; during the eight days I spent

in Alice Springs I never talked to him when he didn't have alcohol on his breath and seem to be under its influence. In this same town, dozens of Aborigines wander the streets looking for odd jobs and just -- finally -- sit down on a patch of grass and wait for the end of the day. Could one of them, drunk or sober, as easily have walked into the job of ambulance driver?

During my stay, I heard almost nothing about the Aborigines' attitude toward whites. Most whites don't even bother to conjecture about those attitudes, much less try to determine them by talking candidly with Aborigines. But one head teacher at an Aboriginal school volunteered this information: "The Aborigines hate whites. It comes out when they've had a few. It has to: they're so quiet and passive, it must be ready to explode inside. They curse at whites and threaten to kill them when they're drunk."

When I tried to get some corroboration of this from whites who had some contact with Aborigines, they disclaimed all knowledge or experience of such behavior.

This lack of knowledge or, rather, this psychological distance between whites and Aborigines is perceivable in teachers of Aboriginal children. Very few ever mentioned the parents of the children they were trying to teach. When I raised the question, "How do the parents feel about the school?" or "Do parents want their children to finish school?" there was usually some vague observation about the parents' lack of interest or of ability. I got the impression that parents were not considered as partners in the education of the child. Unlike the attitude toward poor Black parents in the U. S., Aboriginal parents are not even blamed much for the failure of the children in school.

There was one school teacher who, I thought at first, was willing to concede that there was more to Aborigines than the prevalent over-simplified stereotype. He believed that "the Aborigine is very complicated." And then he proceeded to indicate that he understood Aborigines quite well. "You see," he said, "he can't discipline himself the way we do. He does what needs doing today, but he won't do for tomorrow. And every few weeks he goes walkabout." So much for human complexity!

Though the Aboriginal movement is growing, Australian teachers seem unaware of the significance of much of what is happening. This was graphically brought home to me in one instance in a school almost evenly populated with Aboriginal and European children. I asked the fourth-grade teacher how the two groups of children got along. "Just beautifully," she said. "They see each other as all the same -- no differences."

I looked around the room, at light-skinned, blonde children and at brown-skinned children with black hair and wondered to myself at how they could see no differences when those differences were so apparent. "When I let them draw self-portraits," she told me, "they all draw themselves the same way."

"The same?" I asked. "Yes." And she pulled some drawings from a shelf. "See?" She was quite right; the children had all drawn themselves as whites with light hair.

"No child ever draws himself with brown skin?" I asked. "No," she said, comfortable in the rightness of things. Then a slight frown creased her forehead, and she leaned toward me and lowered her voice. "Do you see that child there?" I nodded. She was indicating a very dark-brown Aboriginal child. "The other day, when I asked the children to draw themselves, he colored himself very dark. I asked him why; he'd never done that before. And he said to me, 'I'm

Black and I'm beautiful.'"

She looked at me as if she expected me to understand something, but I was not sure what she had in mind. Finally I said, tentatively, "What did you do?"

"Oh," she said. "I realized someone must have said something to him and he was upset. But we straightened it out, and he's fine now."

"He draws himself white-skinned now?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "He's quite all right now. It was just a temporary thing."

Intergroup education is practically non-existent in Australian schools. Not surprisingly, the awareness of intergroup problems is very low among non-victims even while the problems continue to proliferate. Whites and Aborigines, whites and Orientals, old Australians and newcomers from eastern and southern Europe are experiencing difficulties in their relations with each other, but the dominant groups often do not know what is happening, what they are perpetuating. "We have no race problems here," one person told me. And, in the next breath, "I know the Indians of Uganda would not be accepted [by Australians]. Italians are accepted - uh - up to a point, that is." Apparently, he did not view the lack of acceptance as a problem.

Another example involves an American working side by side with a Melbournian of Indian descent. When the American said to him enthusiastically one day, "I <u>like</u> your country!" other (white) Australians within earshort looked up startled and indignant, at the idea that this was his country. He was an Indian, even though his family had been there for three generations.

In one Aboriginal settlement established almost a generation ago by a church group, the teachers were joined by members of the town council when I demonstrated my intergroup techniques. This situation was unique in Australia, I was told.

Here, the minister, the director of the school and the teachers were all committed to helping the Aboriginal people to take over the governing of their own settlement. Consequently, the Aboriginal town council was responsible for making all decisions relating to the school, the church and, supposedly, everyday governance.

It did not take more than a couple of hours in the settlement for me to realize that the process toward self-determination had still a long way to go. Not a few of the obstacles to fulfillment lay in the intergroup behaviors of the whites. First, though many of them had lived there for years, they did not speak the language of the people. It became immediately apparent to me that the members of the town council spoke almost no English, and I wondered how effective communication was between those who struggled for self-determination and those who obviously received the money and were the prime contact with the source of that money.

While I was teaching the intergroup techniques, some of the teachers (whites) "helped" the Aboriginal council members with the processes. The nature of that help was extremely embarrassing to me, though I don't know how the people helped felt about it. It took the form of rather loud repetition of my directions to individuals, taking the pencil from someone's hand and "showing them how," and domination of discussions with no attempt to draw the Aboriginal people in. The post-demonstration discussion was held over tea in the home economics room, with no members of the town council present. Overall, the behavior of the teachers toward the Aborigines seemed overbearing and patronizing and the end result was a very effective psychological and physical exclusion from the inner circle of those who "know."

The attitude of school people in Australia was nowhere made more clear to me than in one school in the central part of the country. The population was identified as 40 per cent colored (part Aboriginal) and pure Aboriginal and 50 per cent working-class whites. (The other 10 per cent was made up of children of foreigners, and those of Oriental background. The headmaster and a local minister told me there was much interracial strife in the school. Name-calling and racial insults were common (e.g., "You're a blackfellow." "You live with natives.")

According to the headmaster, integration was not their problem. Though the children kept themselves separate along group lines, the impetus for the separation came from the Aborigines, who preferred to keep to themselves. Almost as if he "fled where none pursued," he said firmly, "This is a European school designed for Europeans. And we have to adapt the curriculum to make it relevant to non-Europeans." It never became clear to me if this was a statement of purpose for future achievement, a description of the current deficiencies, or merely a defense for maintaining the status quo.

The problem census I conducted with the teachers in this school revealed feelings, beliefs and levels of knowledge that were amazingly like those of American teachers in similar intergroup situations. Some teachers, apparently, were still wondering if there are indeed racial differences in intelligence, presumably so that they will know if it is worthwhile trying to teach children of some groups. Others revealed an abiding need to know what it feels like to be a member of another group. Still others were convinced that dealing with racial matters in the classroom merely exacerbates the problems.

Below are the responses resulting from the problem census I did with these teachers in the "integrated" school. I asked the question, "What do you want to know about race relations?" and then recorded their answers:

If you belong to a particular race, do you automatically think you are superior, or do some races think they are inferior?

Is New Zealand the only country where there's evidence of races living in harmony?

Are some people Black by nature and not by colour of skin?

Why do white people like to get a suntan?

Do most wars have a racial basis?

Prejudice - just exactly what do we mean by racial prejudice?

Has either side made attempts at reconciliation with each other? [in the U. S.]

Is a separate state a possibility - a separate Negro state?

What do we mean by race?

Could we live with Negroes?

If Black people become supreme would they consider our standards sufficient or would they raise or lower them?

Is fear the root of race relations?

Isn't it true that most of the trouble in the world has been between white races?

How prejudiced are the Blacks against whites?

When is a wog not a wog? [a denigrating term for non-whites]

What are the possibilities of a Negro president?

Why pick on somebody else's prejudice - why not look at our own?

Would Black supremacy be such a bad thing?

Is the immigration program being cut back because of worsening race relations? [probably England]

Has the Black man really got a hangup about white women?

How great is this expression in America: "Black is beautiful"?

How strong is this Black power movement?

Is the difference in America's and Australia's problems only one of size?

Are there particular areas where it's stronger or is it throughout the country generally?

Does it start in schools?

How strong is it amongst kids?

Is it a socioeconomic problem?

Do you actually want to improve them [race relations] in America?

Do the Black people want our way of life?

Why should we try to impose our way of life on them?

How does the United States' racial problem compare with Rhodesia where there's a policy of apartheid?

Has the racial problem a basis of jealousy?

Will the racial conclusion in South Africa be any less violent than elsewhere?

Has unemployment any effect on race relations?

How active is the Ku Klux Klan still?

Is it more active among the younger generation than the older generation?

What do the Black people want?

What are the problems caused by mixed marriages?

Is there any move for Black supremacy?

It is interesting that school people feel that intergroup education is primarily for minority people. In Australia, it is for Aborigines; in the United States, it is for Black, Indian, Chicano and Puerto Rican people. There is little awareness among educators that intergroup education is needed by whites. The suggestion that, since whites hold the power and also have the prejudice, it is whites who need the intergroup education, causes some surprised recognition. (Just a few months ago, a graduate student in education who is also a school administrator, informed me that he would like to stay for my "lecture" but the content was really not applicable to his situation. "I work in the suburbs," he said, "and there are no Black people there." All he does is work in a community that systematically excludes Black people, so obviously there is no need for sensitivity and knowledge in the area of race relations!)

The head social worker of the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria informed me at one time that since much of their educative function lies in the area of educating whites, my intergroup education techniques would be of interest to them. However, I subsequently learned that their education consists of informing social workers of the facts about Aborigines. Their type of education is exemplified by a pamphlet they publish called Answering Your Questions About Aborigines. A sample questions in it is, "Is education the key to well-being for Aborigines?" The answer touches briefly on the obstacles encountered in the education of Aborigines and ends up with, "Educational progress depends upon numerous factors, many of them intangible and beyond the school situation. These factors include parental encouragement, infant experiences, confidence, the conflict between family and school values, a pupil's willingness to strive for the distant rewards promised by formal education, and so on." Somehow, I

cannot shake the feeling that the emphasis is on how difficult -- if not impossible for most -- it is for the Aborigine to become westernized and, consequently, civilized.

Someone in this same ministry told me that, in their contact with Aborigines, most of what they provided was an opportunity for people to "blow off steam." On the face of it, this seems a useful government function, since it successfully reduces the build-up of Aboriginal frustration and delays the initiation of militant activity to change the status quo.

If our racial attitudes are any indication of our affinity for each other, Australia and the United States are well on the way to being one-world members.